



**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**

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February 8, 2008

**SUMMARY OF SUBJECT MATTER**

**TO:** Members of the Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials

**FROM:** Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials Staff

**SUBJECT:** Field Hearing on the Role of Intercity Passenger Rail During National Emergencies

**PURPOSE OF HEARING**

The Subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines, and Hazardous Materials is scheduled to meet on Monday, February 11, 2008, at 10:00 a.m., at the New Orleans Union Passenger Terminal, 1001 Loyola Ave., New Orleans, LA 70113 to receive testimony on the role of intercity passenger rail during national emergencies.

**BACKGROUND**

In the event of a large-scale emergency, state and local governments are the primary entity responsible for managing a response. In a catastrophic disaster, and if the governor requests, federal resources can be mobilized through the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's ("DHS") Federal Emergency Management Agency ("FEMA") for search and rescue, electrical power, food, water, shelter and other basic human needs. A governor's request for a major disaster declaration could mean an infusion of federal funds, but the governor must also commit significant state funds and resources for recovery efforts.

The federal government's role in disaster response is outlined in the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act ("Stafford Act", P.L. 93-288), which established the programs and processes for the federal government to provide major disaster and emergency assistance to state, local, and tribal governments, individuals, and qualified private nonprofit organizations. FEMA has responsibility to administer the provisions of the Stafford Act. The Stafford Act further clarifies the federal government's role by establishing that disasters should be managed at the lowest possible governmental level.

In addition to federal resources, states affected by a catastrophic disaster can also turn to other states for assistance in obtaining "surge capacity," i.e. the ability to draw on additional resources, such as personnel and equipment, needed to respond to and recover from the incident. One way of sharing personnel and equipment across state lines is through the use of the Emergency Management Assistance Compact, an interstate compact that provides a legal and administrative framework for managing such emergency requests. The compact includes all 50 states and the District of Columbia.

### INTERCITY PASSENGER RAIL AND DISASTERS

Intercity passenger rail has many advantages in disaster situations, including evacuating residents, transporting first responders and equipment to assist in disaster relief, and often responding to people lacking alternative modes of transportation, such as those who rely on public transportation. Further, it is helpful for transporting individuals that need special assistance due to medical conditions or hospitalization. Finally, it is sometimes the only mode available to transport people and equipment medium- to long-range distances in a timely manner.

Intercity passenger rail played an important role in the recovery efforts following the attack on the World Trade Center (WTC) on September 11, 2001 ("9/11"). For example, after aviation service was suspended following the attacks, Amtrak transported 1,000 firefighters, police officers, and emergency workers from Boston and Washington, D.C. to the WTC.

While the value of intercity passenger rail was first neglected in the lead up to Hurricane Katrina ("Katrina"), its value was reinforced following Katrina and Hurricane Rita ("Rita"). Initially, the City of New Orleans failed to respond to an Amtrak offer to assist the City's initial evacuation efforts. A Federal Highway Administration ("FHWA") report entitled "Catastrophic Hurricane Evacuation Plan Evaluation," found that a 20-car Amtrak train prepared to move 900 people to safety left empty due to Federal, state and local organizational challenges and lack of planning.

However, intercity passenger rail was a valuable evacuation tool prior to Hurricane Rita, which followed Katrina and affected parts of Texas and Louisiana on September 24, 2005. When emergency officials began evacuating the Houston area prior to Rita reaching the coast, it spurred the largest evacuation in Texas history. As a result, nearly three million people attempted to evacuate the Gulf Coast, leading to massive gridlock on the roads.

While seven people died due to Hurricane Rita, the National Hurricane Center reported that over 100 people died due to the evacuation, many in car accidents or from heat exposure, including 23 senior citizens due to an on-road accident during the evacuation. Area highways were gridlocked and vehicle breakdowns were common. Delays as long as 24 hours caused many cars to run out of gas and car rental companies ran out of vehicles to rent.

Trinity Railway Express (TRE), a commuter rail service operating in the Dallas-Ft. Worth area, worked with Amtrak to redirect commuter trains to run between Houston and Dallas. According to FHWA, TRE moved over 450 people to Dallas. Once they reached Dallas, Amtrak

and BNSF Railway personnel loaded the evacuees onto buses and transported them to safety, according to TRE personnel.

Additionally, Amtrak helped evacuate about 300 people on its *Sunset Limited* line.

Immediately following Katrina and Rita, FEMA, in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration ("FRA") worked with Amtrak, commuter trains, and freight railroads to support emergency response. Trains moved evacuees out of the region and to transport heavy equipment, supplies, and relief equipment into the area. Unfortunately, the FHWA reported that these efforts were continually challenged due to the lack of communication, coordination, and prior planning among local, State, and Federal officials.

Additionally, FHWA reported that the experiences in New Orleans accentuated the need to better incorporate intercity passenger rail and other transportation modes in evacuation plans. New Orleans had a large segment of its population that could not evacuate in personal vehicles, and the City was unprepared to evacuate so many persons using other modes, including intercity passenger rail. Following Hurricane Katrina, the City developed a plan to utilize intercity passenger rail and other transportation modes to evacuate those who cannot evacuate by private vehicle.

While the evacuation of New Orleans in response to Hurricane Katrina was considered relatively successful for people with their own vehicles, approximately 1 million people evacuated Louisiana prior to landfall. However, approximately 100,000 people were not evacuated prior to the storm, in many cases because these people lacked access to a vehicle. Hurricane Katrina ultimately resulted in over 1,300 deaths. Among those who could not evacuate were some of society's most vulnerable populations: the elderly, low-income individuals, and persons with disabilities. These populations often lack the ability to provide for their own transportation.

Evacuations of varying scales are common in the United States and can be triggered by a variety of events, including natural disasters such as Katrina and Rita, wildfires, and terrorist attacks like those committed on 9/11. In fact, emergency evacuations of more than 1,000 people occur more than three times a month. While evacuation is only one option in response to an emergency, it is complex and contains several critical components, including transportation, shelter, supplies, and security, among others. Each of these components is itself complex and often interrelated to transportation. Those who, by choice or circumstance, do not have access to a personal vehicle or are precluded from driving may require evacuation assistance during emergencies.

The 2000 U.S. Census indicates that the population categories previously defined as transportation-disadvantaged—the elderly, low-income individuals, and persons with disabilities—comprise a large segment of the country's total population of over 300 million. For example, Census data indicated that, in 2000, 12 percent of Americans were age 65 and over, 12 percent were living below the poverty line, and 23 percent had a disability. However, the transportation-disadvantaged not only include vulnerable populations, but all those who are car-less during an emergency. In 2000, the top 10 car-less cities had between 29 and 56 percent of households without a vehicle. However, people who require transportation assistance in an evacuation may be an even larger group because, in an emergency, anyone without immediate access to transportation may require assistance.

Following the events of Katrina and Rita, the Department of Transportation Inspector General recommended that DHS, in coordination with the Department of Transportation and the State of Louisiana, work to: identify those who could not evacuate on their own; establish an interagency transportation management unit to coordinate the routing of buses; enter into contracts to provide transportation by bus, rail, and air; and provide transportation from state and local pre-established collection points to shelters, rail sites, or air transportation sites.

### SUNSET LIMITED

The *Sunset Limited* is an Amtrak passenger train that runs between New Orleans, Louisiana and Los Angeles, California. From early 1993 to August 2005 however, Amtrak extended the line as far east as Florida. Following the devastating 2005 hurricane season, the *Sunset Limited's* service was to stop at San Antonio until repairs were completed in October 2005. However, while repairs were completed, service was restored only between New Orleans and Los Angeles. The *Sunset Limited's* previous service along the eastern half of the Gulf Coast into Florida did not restart.

In January 2006, CSX, owner of the rail line from New Orleans to Florida, finished restoring damaged tracks and resumed freight traffic. Despite the complete restoration of rail service along the Gulf Coast, damage to stations and other Amtrak-owned infrastructure has prevented the restoration of full passenger service for the *Sunset Limited*. While Amtrak is considering options to restore service, it has not yet implemented a plan to restore service.

Prior to Hurricane Katrina, the New Orleans-to-Orlando segment accounted for 28 percent of the *Sunset Limited's* miles, but 39 percent of ridership, and 41 percent of revenue. The *Sunset Limited* is the only Amtrak route connecting California, the Southwest, Texas, and New Orleans with Florida.

If service is restored to the *Sunset Limited* between New Orleans and Pensacola, Amtrak could be utilized by the states of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida as a reliable method for evacuating residents during a national emergency.

**EXPECTED WITNESSES**

**Dr. John E. Bertini, Jr., MD, FACS**

**Mr. Glenn Cannon**  
Assistant Administrator  
Disaster Operations Directorate  
Federal Emergency Management Administration

**Colonel Terry Ebbert**  
Director of Homeland Security  
City of New Orleans

**Mr. Jeff Moller**  
Executive Director, Safety & Operations  
Association of American Railroads

**The Honorable C. Ray Nagin**  
Mayor  
City of New Orleans

**Ms. Karen Parsons**  
Executive Director  
Southern Rapid Rail Transit Commission

**Mr. Richard Phelps**  
Vice President for Transportation  
Amtrak

**Colonel Pat Santos**  
Assistant Deputy Director for Operations  
Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness  
State of Louisiana

**Mr. Wayne Thomas**  
Vice President for Homeland Security and Emergency Management  
Innovative Emergency Management